

# Beginning to swing

**Alyn Shipton** meets Tim Richards, a successful jazz pianist who has now published two new books which are helping to introduce pianists to the world of jazz, blues and improvisation

One of the big challenges that confronts any teacher aiming to launch their piano students as jazz players is to get over the invisible hurdle of starting to improvise. In my own experience, it's often encouraging the student to take the first few hesitant steps of playing on his or her own that presents the biggest obstacle, and I found that a book published in 1997 called *Improvising Blues Piano* by the English pianist Tim Richards was a major help in overcoming this. Based around the 12-bar blues chord sequence, and sticking to relatively simple harmony, it offers a firm launch pad for would-be solo improvisers. Based on Tim's own extensive teaching experience, it seemed to hit the right level immediately. It gave my students (at the annual Ascona jazz workshop) the feeling they were playing 'real' pieces almost from the off, and that their first steps in improvising were cushioned in the familiar.

Because Tim is one of Britain's finest jazz pianists in his own right, his work is taken seriously by students. Whether in his nine-piece cutting-edge band, Great Spirit, or his current piano-bass-drums trio, it's possible for UK based students to go and hear him at work, or for those further afield to listen to him on CD, and realise what it is possible to achieve as a result of those first few tentative steps at improvising on one's own.

So I was intrigued to hear that Tim has now published two volumes called *Exploring Jazz Piano*, that take the process on somewhat. In fact, Schott originally approached Tim about writing such a jazz book in the mid-nineties, but he opted to do the blues one first. Then the formation of Great Spirit and its early tours got in the way of moving on to the jazz volume.

'Once I did start,' says Tim, 'I had in mind to write something about the same length as the blues book, but I soon realised I had too much material to squeeze into one volume, so it spread

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**Tim Richards: 'I strongly believe that blues is the best place to start for the would-be improviser'**

into two. The reason I had done blues first was that I strongly believed it was the best place to start for the would-be improviser. Blues has a simple, accessible structure, and predominantly one chord type, namely triads. You can get a jazzier feel by using 6th chords, but mostly the harmonies are familiar dominant sevenths. I teach both players and teachers who want to get their pupils started on jazz, and this has proved to be a really sound starting point, especially for those classically-trained players for whom the level of harmony required to make sense of a lot of jazz hasn't always featured in their education so far. But there are players who want to get on to greater jazz content at once, and for them, I've written the first volume of the new books as an alternative starting point.'

One of Tim's abiding principles in all three books is that the material gets progressively more

difficult within each chapter. Hence one can absorb a wide range of concepts by working through only the first sections of each one, where – by and large – the material is quite straightforward to play. Then one can return and delve into each chapter's topic in more depth. Once again, though, Tim restricts the opening chapters to quite simple harmonies.

'I start off again with triads,' he says, 'because you can play quite convincing jazz by just using triad chords. It's not just "trad" that depends on them, but many other styles of jazz. I'm not duplicating the same ground as my blues book, and I'm trying to get each student to the point where they're playing something identifiable as jazz early on.'

By the end of the second chapter, as well as taking on some focussed ear training, encountering the cycle of fifths, starting to think about vertical and scalar improvisation techniques, and tackling a range of scales and arpeggios, the student will have played through several pieces of Tim's and such standards as Abdullah Ibrahim's *Mannenburg* and Billy Strayhorn's *Take the A-Train*.

One element that Tim tackles early on, and which is not often dealt with in jazz piano tutors, is a range of strategies for playing solo compared to working with bass and drums. 'There's a CD with the book, as before,' he says, 'but this time it's with a trio, not just solo piano as it was for blues. One thing I've done is to include some "playalong" tracks with just drums, because every so often you'll be asked to play somewhere where there's no bass player. As far as I know this is the first "playalong" CD to do this, but it's really important for would-be jazz players to discover a range of strategies for playing solo, or carrying the rhythm section.'

Tim's credentials in a wide range of playing styles are well demonstrated on his most recent trio CD, *Twelve By Three*, which shows him playing through material by one or two of the lesser-known giants of the genre. 'I suppose it is a bit of a survey of my favourite players,' he agrees. 'Players like Billy Taylor, Hampton Hawes and Bobby Timmons are all represented, as is Gene Harris, one of my personal favourites. I think often some of my European contemporaries miss out on that funky, bluesy feelgood character, which was my starting point in the first book.'

*Exploring Jazz Piano* Vols 1 and 2 are published by Schott. [www.timrichards.ndo.co.uk](http://www.timrichards.ndo.co.uk)